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Origins of the Marshall Space Flight Center

Marshall Space Flight Center's legacy of contributions to the American space program dates back to September 8, 1960. On that date, President Dwight Eisenhower formally dedicated the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville as a new field installation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Named for the late General George C. Marshall, the Marshall Center resulted from the transfer in Huntsville of 4,670 Army civil service employees and 1,840 acres of Redstone Arsenal property and facilities worth $100 million.

Marshall's rocket and space legacy also has roots in Germany. Among those who joined President Eisenhower at the dedication of the new Marshall Center was Dr. Wernher von Braun, the Center's first director. Von Braun's interest in rocketry dated back to his early years growing up in his native Germany prior to World War II. Von Braun had studied under the famous rocket theoretician, Hermann Oberth, and had joined him in early rocket experiments conducted under the sponsorship of the German Society for Space Travel.

The original German rocket team shortly after their arrival in 1946 at Fort Bliss, Texas.

A young Wernher von Braun holding a model of the V-2 rocket.

During World War II, von Braun was technical director at the Peenemünde Rocket Center in Germany. There he and his growing team of specialists built the famous V–2 rocket that established the technological basis for post-war experimentation with even more powerful rockets. When von Braun and his team recognized that the war was ending and that Russian troops would soon occupy Peenemünde, they decided to evacuate the rocket development site. Traveling in caravans by any number of means, the scientists headed south bluffing their way through German checkpoints, eventually deciding to surrender to American forces. As World War II ended, the United States government manifested interest in the technical capability of the von Braun team. A group of American scientists was dispatched to Europe on August 14, 1945, to collect information and equipment related to German rocket research. As a result, the components for approximately 100 V–2 ballistic missiles were recovered and shipped from Germany to White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico. In late 1945, more than 100 members of the von Braun team agreed to come to the United States to work under U.S. Army supervision.

Assigned to Fort Bliss, Texas, the Germans and Americans rebuilt, tested, and flew the V–2 rockets previously shipped to the U.S. from Germany. The first American-assembled V–2 was static fired on March 14, 1946, at White Sands. June 28,1946, marked the first successful launch of a V–2 rocket fully instrumented for upper air research. The rocket attained a height of 67 miles.